

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 3, March 2019

www.ijellh.com

Dr. M. Shanthi

Associate Professor,

Dnyanprassarak Mandal's College and Research Centre,

Assagao, Goa, India

shanthimuninathan@gmail.com

Politics of Gender on campus: A study of Srividya Natarajan's *No Onions nor Garlic*

Abstract

In the past, women were portrayed either as purely divine or utterly demonic. The pre-determined notion of male domination--female submission is deemed a universal factor. In the current changing scenario, where both genders are working together to become equal partners, is subjugation of women a myth or reality? Feminist perspectives provide a framework for analysis. The dynamics of current day man-woman relationships highlight changing gender equations. Power politics and the evolving growth and transformation of women occupy a predominant place in the minds of writers and feminists. The aim of the present study is to understand the effect of power politics on the status of women in academic campuses. The conclusion drawn through the study of Srividhya Natarajan's campus novel, *No Onions nor Garlic* is that a woman who is strong in her convictions and approach can face a male dominated society with confidence and positivity.

Key Words: Women's Status, Male Domination Vs Female Submission, Changing Scenario, Power Game, Dominant Vs Dominated.

Women in Patriarchal Assumptions: The Indian Context

The status of women as portrayed in the great epics like “Ramayana” and “Mahabharata” is that of a divine goddess, a virtuous wife or a demoness with ill intent. From Sita to Soorpanaka, all the women are portrayed in either-or binaries. Most of the stories from the Jataka tales and the Panchatantra depict women not with human qualities. Religious fundamentalists were of the unanimous opinion that power should not be given to women and if it is given it would lead to a disastrous end of a home, a state or a country. In the following lines, the ancient Indian sage Manu described the position of a woman, “No act to be done according to (her) own will by a young girl, a young woman, or even by an old woman, though in (their own) houses (hirmukta.com).” He went on to declare that, “She must always be cheerful and clever in household business, with the furniture well cleaned, and with not a free hand in expenditure. She must perform her duty with complete dedication and diligence, to the entire satisfaction of the lord and the master of the house. She not only has to please her master when he is alive, but also she cannot ‘disregard’ him even after his death; which means she cannot remarry (hirmukta.com).”

Thus Manu’s edicts have formed an essential part of the Indian male psyche. The scope of this paper encompasses a consideration of women’s predicament in this typical Manuvian milieu where it is believed that if a woman is given the secondary role she can be controlled and subjugated. Pen was in man’s hand and what he thought was thought by all. A woman was only made to think from the point of view of a man.

Women’s Aspirations

In the early 19th and 20th centuries, the main areas of focus of writers, with reference to women, was their portrayal as obedient wives, daughters or sisters who were surrounded by family responsibilities and the dilemmas of their daily life and were expected to suppress their yearnings. For centuries the burden of handling household tasks and other odd jobs has

rested on the shoulders of women. Women have been considered the embodiment of domestic virtues.

Patriarchal dominance is the root cause of the decimation of women's rights. In the process, women have become marginalized creatures and their destiny is always defined in deference to men. A woman's reality and way of life is in a large way determined by what man decides or what the patriarchal norm expects from her. Society imparts the fullest autonomy to 'man', instilling in him the pride of manhood while a woman feels cornered and overwhelmed by the harsh and unpleasant treatment meted out by the same society.

The inferior status which is ascribed to her forces her to give up the freedom she craves and to live as a caretaker. Since time immemorial, domestic violence against women has been an intrinsic part of our society. Contributing factors could be the desire to gain control over another individual, the desire to exploit and the desire to be in a position of supremacy. On various occasions, psychological problems and social influence also add to the vehemence. A woman has a tendency to bear the harassment she is subjected to. A traditional and orthodox mindset makes women bear suffering without protest. Women are the victims of exploitation regardless of whether they reside in a developed or a backward country. Domestic violence affects women in all aspects of life i.e. assaulted women will suffer agony and emotional turbulence. Not only do women battle to earn respect from men, they also struggle to be respected by their own sex. Many times, we see discrimination, injustice and cruelty committed by one woman against another like a mother who aborts a female fetus, a mother-in-law harassing the daughter-in-law for dowry or even one woman defaming another. It is self-evident that a woman has been denied equal social status and is always considered as the 'other' in society. Thus, male domination and female submissiveness are accepted realities of society.

Feminism: The Western Concept

over the ages there has been an undercurrent of dissent with women raising their voices. In this regard, the word “feminism” is worth taking note of. The word “feminism” speaks of an intense awareness of self-identity as a woman. It aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women’s social roles and lived experience. Feminists have thus tried to address these issues through their writings. “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (110)” said Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. She further asserted that men stereotyped women and used it as an excuse to organise society in their own way. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, Ellen Moers’ *Literary Women*, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* deal with the unfairness and inequalities dispensed to women in a given society. They argue that women are human beings deserving of equal opportunities and the same fundamental rights as men. They intend to define, establish and defend equal political, economic, cultural and social rights and opportunities for women. A feminist is generally defined as advocating for or supporting the rights and equality of women. The ultimate goal is to enable women to achieve self-realization, self-definition, and self-actualization by having freedom of choice and freedom of life, i.e. a life of her own. The feminist struggle has achieved a different and better status for women in society.

Women’s Position Today

The modern world today has made tremendous advances in all fields. Likewise, women too have shown appreciable progress in all walks of life. No longer are they limited in their choices. They demanded and won rights which they were earlier deprived of. Today

they excel in all fields and are considered equal with men, owing to the contribution of the many who fought for the rights of women.

Ours is a male biased society. In today's scenario the changing roles allow women to attain prominent positions and power. During the last few decades, increasing levels of education, industrialization, urbanization, awareness of rights, wider influence of media and westernization have changed the status and position of women. Women have moved from the kitchen to the highest levels of professional activities. The number of educated and working women is increasing. Women are in a position to compete with men in all walks of life. Though gender bias has been an undeniable truth in all spheres including academics, teaching has always been a profession open to women. Due to social prejudice and double responsibilities of home and workplace, women lose ground professionally through no fault of theirs. In the face of discrimination at the workplace they lose their confidence, leading to feelings of inferiority, uselessness and inability. The end result is mental fatigue, stress related issues and very low job satisfaction.

Feminism and in English Literature

Men and women writers have depicted through their writings the prevailing patriarchal domination and female subjugation in our society. Henrik Ibsen's play *The Doll's House* is considered the first of its kind in exposing not only the male domination but also voices the rights of a woman. The heroine Nora, a house wife was treated like a doll and a chirping bird by her husband Helmer. She breaks the monotony of submitting to societal pressures. At the end of the play, she slams the door in order to show the world that she wants to have an identity for herself. She does not succumb to domestic liabilities and asserts her long denied freedom. Ibsen illustrates the concept that a woman can survive on her own

without the support of a husband. The play portrays that a woman, when pushed, can strive for her freedom.

Another example from the literary work which can be cited is *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. Eliza Doolittle, the heroine of the play chooses her own path by selecting a partner of her choice. When she feels Higgins, the hero of the play is dominating and misusing her, she walks out of his life in spite of his pleadings. She asserts her rights by not succumbing to the lure of the luxurious life which would be hers if she remained with Higgins. She proves that a woman is capable of making her own decisions in life. These two plays are fine examples that depict the subjugation of women in a male dominated society is just a myth. This has also been suggested by the renowned Indian English woman novelist Shashi Deshpande in her award-winning novel *That Long Silence* through the phrase “*Yathechchasi tatha kuru*” – which means ‘Do as you Desire (293).

Feminism and Indian Writing in English

Indian novels in English by women have undergone several phases of experimentation in terms of themes and expression in the last few decades. Remarkable changes in domestic and public spheres are responsible for the depiction of varied hues and colours of human life. Novelities mark the growth of Indian novels from post- independence to post- modern period. The modern outlook towards life has revolutionized contemporary life and literature. Indian women novelists like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Rita Joshi and Srividya Natarajan, to name a few, have advocated feminists themes in their novels. These novelists have unraveled the subjugation of women in Indian patriarchal society and created awareness through their writings. Shashi Deshpande has portrayed in her novels, the feel and tone of modern Indian educated women who are struggling to define their roles and search for their identity in society. Through the

character of Jaya in the novel *That Long Silence* she tries to present that a woman should no longer think of herself as being under the shackles of patriarchal subjugation and should rise and express herself to attain her freedom. Rita Joshi's campus novella *The Awakening* talks about the present-day college system of India. How the protagonist JR comes cheerfully from the University of Cambridge to find fame and fortune in India by taking up the teaching profession and the disappointments she faces occupies the crux of the novel. Finally she takes up writing as her profession due to the petty politics played by her colleagues. Rita Joshi through JR explains how women can still achieve in spite of being undervalued for their contributions.

The Campus Power Politics

The campus novel, *No Onions nor Garlic* depicts both the faculty and the student point of view. Though written in a slapstick style, Srividya Natarajan conveys several serious issues through her novel. She deals with the caste system, corruption in the academic circle, bullying and harassment of a female teacher and a student. The plot is set on and off the campus of Chennai University. Professor Ram, an onion-and-garlic-free Tamil Brahmin, is the head of the department of English who tries to manipulate his students and colleagues especially the women for self-serving motives.

Bullying includes excluding a female colleague from working effectively or not allowing her to take part in activities related to academic teaching and research. Professor Ram bullies his junior colleague Dr. Laurentia Arul in every possible way in order to demoralize her. Dr. Arul is appointed to the position she deserved at the University since she had a brilliant teaching record, was widely read and had a high percentage of marks. But in spite of all these qualifications the only reason she could be appointed to the position was because all the naysayers and bullies were away- Prof Ram was on sabbatical and his three stooges on the

interview panel were on leave. The readers are given a glimpse of her talent when she challenges the members of the interview panel and overcomes the feeble questions only to move onto larger issues. She corrects their errors and challenges their expertise. As an intelligent young teacher she brings many changes in the syllabi by introducing Marx, Fanon, Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory. She was the only capable teacher who had good command over the subject. Moreover she was a favourite teacher among the student community. Prof Ram feels jittery and launches attacks against her through his colleagues and students. He plays mind games in order to make her feel less successful and confident as well as to frighten her. He believes his dirty games will leave her scared, stressed, anxious or depressed. However, he could not fulfill his mission as she is a strong woman.

Intimidation is the main weapon to make a woman to feel less important and unwanted. Professor Ram tries his best to intimidate Dr. Arul as he hates her. He knows that since she is strong in her subject, the student's favourite and she has many books to her credit, he will not be able to send her away even though he tries his best to insult her wherever possible. When Prof. Ram's research student writes nasty comments about him on the wall, he suspects that Dr. Arul has written it and attacks her verbally and physically. Srividya Natarajan narrates the petty acts of vengeance committed by Prof Ram on Dr. Arul (he bites and hits her in front of students) when his male ego is hurt by her refusal to submit to his domination at the workplace. Dr. Arul hits him back with her handbag as an act of self-defence. Though this is depicted in a humorous manner, the stark reality of patriarchal domination, the loss of control and the desire for revenge that results from a loss of power is well portrayed through Prof Ram.

In order to support his male colleague, Prof Narayan asks Prof Ram to give a complaint to the vice chancellor against Dr. Arul. He also suggests that a discipline committee be appointed to take action against Dr. Arul without hearing her side of the story.

The power and influence of the male teachers could rewrite the fate of a female teacher. Sundar, a research student in the department witnessed the incident and gathers students to give testimony regarding the incident. This saves Dr. Arul from being wrongfully punished. Even without Sundar's help, with her confidence and boldness Dr. Arul would have argued her case and continued in the University. Through Dr. Arul's example the author elucidates that in spite of male domination, female buoyancy and self-assurance allow a woman to assert her opinion and stand up for herself.

Ram is biased in favour of the people of his caste in the college. Caste discrimination makes him close his eyes to outstanding Dalit students and take only Brahmin students as his research students. Jiva, an exceptional Dalit student, registers under him. Prof Ram does not allow Jiva to present a paper at the ACS conference and feels that he being the senior professor can bully the innocent research scholar. He asks Sundar to present a paper on "The Tay poems of William McGonagall and Abhinava Gupta's Abhinavabharati (Natarajan 45)." Even though Sundar finds both the poets boring and does not know much about their work, Prof Ram insists that as a Brahmin boy he should get the opportunity to expose his knowledge to the outside world and consecutively fetch good research projects. On the other hand, he harasses Jiva by not allowing her to enter the seminar hall. He tries to dominate research students who come from the reserved category by mocking their pronunciation.

Prof Ram is known for his self-centeredness. After submitting her thesis on "Drama and Folklore" Jiva applies for a lecturer post in Drama, Prof Ram calls her and tells her, "I wonder if you could do me a little favour... a little token of your esteem for your superior" (Natarajan 93). Jiva gets the shock of her life when he asks her to refrain from attending the interview for the open post as his son Chunky would also be attending the same interview. He wanted his son to get the job. He tries to convince her that within six months there would be a vacant post for the reserved category. He assures her that he would recommend her name for

the position. When Jiva refuses to oblige, Prof. Ram threatens her that he would not give her a recommendation letter for the viva-voce. He is the embodiment of the negative use of power. He uses his power only for personal benefit.

To Prof Ram's dismay, Dr. Kapoor who was the ex-president of the ACS conference declares that Dr. Arul would be the next president. All's well that ends well in the novel. Dr. Arul says that her position and Jiva's selection as a lecturer in the department are signs that the University culture would change for the better in the future. Srividya Natarajan conveys through Dr Arul that there would be a positive change and it would be genuinely be an egalitarian one. If women have strong convictions and strive to fight for their rights, no one can suppress them.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that throughout the ages though women have been subjugated and side lined yet there has always been a spark of rebellion in them which when incited would grow into a fire of change and transformation. Feminist writers have contributed a great deal to bringing about a change in the outlook towards women as well as society's conceptions regarding gender roles. Writers like Srividya Natarajan have reiterated the idea that women are not mere puppets whose strings are controlled by men, but that they are fiercely determined and are able to retaliate as and when the need arises. They might be beaten but not broken. Even when pushed to the limit they still stand firm and retain the capability to fight back. Therefore, in the present day context female subjugation can exist only to the extent permitted by suppressed women. To quote Eleanor Roosevelt's book *This is My Story*, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent (35)." As they say, where women are concerned always expect the unexpected.

Works Cited

- Beauvoir, de Simone. Constance, Borde and Shiela, Malovany (Translated), *The Second Sex*. Penguin Random House, 1949.
- Hirday N Patwari, August 27, 2011. *The Status of Women as Depicted by Manu in the Manusmriti* (hirmukta.com>2011/08/27, the status of women).
- Mills, Sara. *Michel Foucault-Routledge Critical Thinkers*. Taylor's and Francis group, 2003.
- McNay, Lois. *Foucault-A Critical Introduction*. Polity Press, 1984.
- Natarajan, Srividya. *No onions nor garlic*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Naik, M. K. and Shyamala, A. Narayan. *Indian English Literature 1980-2000- A Critical Survey*. Pencraft International, 2001.
- Roosevelt, Eleanor. *This is My Story*. Harper Collins, 1937.
- Rowena, Hill. *Vikram Seth's The Golden Gate- A quick Look, The Literary Criterion Vol XXI, No.4*. 87, 1986.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Faculty Towers- The Academic Novel and Its Discontents*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Simons, Jon. *Foucault and the Political*. Routledge, 1995.
- Singh, Priyanka. *Virginia Woolf as a Feminist: A Critical Study*. Contemporary Issues in Languages and Humanities, Vol-4, No. II, June, 2014.
- Verma, K. D. *The Indian Imagination: Critical Essays on Indian writing in English*. St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Vijayadurai, J. and Venkatesh, S. *A Study on Stress Management among Women College Teachers in Tamil Nadu, India*. Pacific Business Review International, Vol.5, Issue 2, August, 2012.